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ABSTRACT

Since the traditional information-based curriculum does not adequately meet contemporary needs, it should be replaced by a process-oriented curriculum that fosters skills in information processing, concept formation, problem solving, and other higher order cognitive processes in conjunction with the development of language skills. There are many indications that both students and adults in our society have failed to develop more than minimal literacy skills. A language communication curriculum for the 1980s must give equal emphasis to subject information and human relations and must effect a respect for both the media and the role of literacy in students' lives. Curricular areas that are particularly suited to the development of language communication include speech, theatre arts and drama, debate, business communication, consumer education, media, and journalism. The language curriculum should help students gain a concept of reading as an integrated process comprising language, thinking, and communication--a concept that is not promoted through fragmented basic skills programs. (Several classroom activities are suggested for each of the curriculum areas discussed.) (GT)

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Literacy through Language Communication: A Curriculum for the 1980s

Grace E. Lee

Orientations to curriculum planning in American education today are varied and fraught with conflicts in goals, content and organization. The traditional information based curriculum of literature, history, philosophy, science, math and foreign languages does not adequately meet the needs of today's living which requires people to think and solve problems regarding food, energy, environment, resources, and global stagflation.

As a direct result of mass communication which shrinks the world and brings into sharp focus the interdependence of all nations and their peoples, attention must be focused on a curriculum which fosters skills in information processing, concept formation, problem-solving, and other higher order cognitive processes such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Such a process oriented curriculum needs to have as its major goal the development of critical thinking abilities and language competencies to externalize these thoughts in order for children and adults to cope successfully with life needs. It requires an interweaving of cognitive processes with listening, speaking, reading, writing, and what Ruth(2) calls the next language art -- nonprint media. The teacher's role is to interest and involve students to be imaginative and original. The student's role is to think, to feel, and to use language.

Lois DeBakey, professor of scientific communications at Baylor College of Medicine, states in "Literacy: Mirror of Society," that young people need to see literacy restored to a position of respect and reward before they will have incentive to learn to master the language arts and develop an appreciation of the value of literacy.(1) Literacy is defined in Britannica World Language Dictionary as the state of being able to read and write and having a knowledge of letters or literature. So defined, it covers a range of capabilities leaving

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virtually no one as "illiterate." The Random House Dictionary of the English Language adds to the above definition "the possession of education."

Society today capitalizes on oral communication and mass media which have a direct impact on verbal proficiency. Use of long-distance telephone has reduced personal correspondence by letters to a lost art. Television viewing has minimized opportunities to read good books and participate in extended conversation and meaningful discussion between parents and children. Continued low reading scores nationally illustrate students' inability to transfer skills acquired in reading/study skills sequences to general comprehension and content areas.

The 1973 USOE Targeted Research and Development Program on Reading studied adult functional reading by asking subjects to read traffic signs, recipes, correspondence, legal forms, product instructions, periodicals, newspapers, and advertisements. A 1974 survey of "survival" literacy rate was conducted by Louis Harris and associates for the National Reading Council. Adults sampled were asked to fill out application forms for social security number, personal bank loan, driver's license, Medicaid and public assistance. The choice of these tasks as representative of functional literacy is a reflection of a society which has reduced its educational expectancy to less than the minimum. The demonstrated poor performance confirmed this low level of expectancy. The 1975 National Assessment of Educational Progress findings did not substantially dispute this self-fulfilling prophecy. Students sampled demonstrated low ability in reading and interpreting graphs, maps, tables and ballots. Their ability to use punctuation marks, give written directions, and write letters was equally poor.

A language communication curriculum for the 1980s must give equal emphasis to subject information and human relations while incorporating contemporary culture with personal relevance. A new respect for both media and verbal literacy can be effected when students are helped to see reading as <u>the</u> form of communicating knowledge which has its roots in literacy within the context of other forms of communication. By focusing on the psycholinguistic

processes which interrelate thought and language in this unique human experience, students will develop an understanding of how people use language, how language affects behavior, how language is acquired, and come to value the role of literacy in their lives. At the same time, they acquire the ability to become independent thinkers, to appreciate people who are different from themselves, and to be able to communicate with and accept others.

Selected curricular areas which merit equal emphasis as traditional subjects and which are particularly suited to the development of language communication are cited below. Grade levels are suggested to facilitate program planning and instruction.

Speech (K-14)

Schools, especially secondary schools, must provide time in class for "student talk" which Bruner referred to as "representation of experience" through symbolic communication. Speech activities help students understand themselves as communicators and provide opportunity to observe themselves in relation to others in the communication situation. At the same time, they learn about the use of nonverbal communication as an integral part of the interpersonal communication process.

An important aspect of language production is intention. Beginning with pictures, comic strips, photographs and posters, messages can be created to illustrate ideas to be articulated. Jokes and riddles are children's favorite linguistic games. Linguistic settings such as conversation and group or panel discussion provide students with opportunities to speak from personal experience and to listen, comprehend, analyze, and synthesize information rapidly and to react to what has been said thoughtfully and responsibly. One of the most exciting spontaneous speech activities children of all ages enjoy is the telling of tall tales. Here, one's imagination and secret desires can soar beyond traditional boundaries and the exercise of fantasy balances out the ordinary and mundane of everyday existence.

Reading out loud to an audience or with the use of records and tapes provide opportunities for students to become responsible listeners and consumers by developing concepts and promoting critical thinking

abilities. Stories (especially open-ended stories), poems, and other literary works can be used to share experience or interpret what one has read or heard; interpretation also increases self-awareness in students through analysis of characters and situations in what was read.

When speaking to inform, to entertain, and to persuade, students develop the ability to elicit from the audience the desired response. This involves audience analysis and identification of occasion.

Speech activities also pave the way for written expression beyond the usual language experience stories. Personal journals give students the opportunity to write their own thoughts in their own way without fear of criticism or teacher evaluation. Communication journals integrate written expression, purposeful thinking, and speech with experience and feeling in an organized fashion to be exchanged for review or used to generate discussion. This type of journal utilizes the students' "voice" as motivation for creative writing which is subject to teacher scrutiny.

Theatre Arts and Drama (K-14)

Theatre arts offer students additional opportunity to practice speech activities while learning the value of drama as literature. They introduce students to an awareness of the humanness of man (including themselves) in historical settings as well as in contemporary society.

Interpretive reading allows students to explore means of expressing and emoting. Critical reading is involved when the components of a play and character analysis are studied. Dramatic activities such as movement, mime, improvisation, charade, role-play, and simulation develop body awareness along with speech and movement in integrated expression. They also enable students to understand group dynamics and to develop a sense of "professionalism." The Artist-in-the-Schools program brings specialists into the schools so that students can benefit directly from their professional expertise.

Science fiction offers students an opportunity to explore the human condition by projecting into the future in order to better understand

the present situation of the human race and to consider future consequences. Students learn to consider the role of the individual in society and in the world of tomorrow. Mysteries is the perfect genre to offer children the opportunity to work out solutions to a puzzle and to develop a sense of appreciation of reading for pleasure. It also promotes creative writing ability in even the youngest students.

Debate (5-14)

Debate necessitates careful study of all sides of an issue and to plan strategies for argument. It requires intellectual discipline in probing and formulating legitimate tactics, skill in organization, case construction, and summarizing. Thoughtfulness in framing arguments generate considerable verbal skills, writing ability, and research techniques which can be added to a student's cognitive and linguistic storehouse. Psychological analysis accompanying these activities can make ideas easy to follow and lasting in memory.

The recent nuclear accident at Three Mile Island provides an excellent topic to generate vigorous perusal of students' language ability in exploration of the political context of the energy issue, advantages of nuclear energy and other alternative sources as well as environmental considerations, etc.

Business Communication (7-14)

In seeking a job, applying for scholarship, or securing a loan, students need to learn to communicate clearly and to know how to conduct themselves in an interviewing situation. Role playing the practice situation is not only an effective classroom technique, it is essential preparation for people who wish to secure the right position in today's competitive job market.

Many students arrive at the job market unable to organize and communicate messages verbally or on paper. In business communications, they must learn the importance of knowing to whom they are addressing letters, reports, memos and press releases. This requires the ability to speak and write clear, concise, logically organized messages.

Reading for information with regard to the nature of a business, extending particular vocabulary used in a business, interpreting business data and reports, and the art of questioning in the total context of business communication results in the learning that language is the most important tool with which students can shape their lives.

Consumer Education (K-14)

As enlightened consumers of contemporary society, students need to learn to read their information environment carefully and to actively seek out implied messages as well as outright deception in the use of language. By being aware of language manipulation and learning to recognize the techniques employed to change our point of view or action, we can avoid mind management. Linguistic tricks such as bad names, glad names, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, bandwagon, glittering generalities, and card stacking in advertising messages, packaging, greeting cards, along with clever use of color and background music, can be carefully explored through creative dramatics, group discussion, individual analysis, and special projects.

Students also need to develop sensitivity toward the meaning and scope of sexism and ethnocentrism in our society. The language and vocabulary used in textbooks, literature, and media reflect values which impinge on our definition of self. It is important to monitor our thinking and expressions in order to eliminate these undesirable patterns which block effective communication with each other.

Media (K-14)

Modern audio-visual technologies have created a generation of communication tool users. To process information conveyed by media which is largely perceptual, instantaneous, unified, and affective (right-hemisphere functions) makes reading print which is cognitive, verbal, linear, sequential, logical, and analytic (left-hemisphere functions) seem laborious and often frustrating. Yet, if students were to make sense of the world and define personal values, they must develop the ability to "encode" media experiences into verbal messages and "decode"

verbal messages into ideas and images. The cognitive and the affective, the analytic and the holistic must work together for effective communication to take place.

Ruth (2, 114-119) detailed a model for teaching media through a four-stage discussion sequence calling for both cognitive and affective responses while engaging students in the use of language to validate their responses. Stage 1 is "seeing" (telling what happened)- the role of perception in remembering and reporting accurately is emphasized; stage 2 is "thinking" (interpreting and understanding)- meaning is allowed to unfold through interaction of personal interpretations; stage 3 is "feeling" (reacting emotionally)- though students may "pass" this round, they are invited to share personal reactions and to discover and understand what it means to be human; stage 4 is "judging" (exercising critical thinking)- questions of value based on specific reasons for their reactions enable students to become responsible critics.

The educational impact in helping students become appreciative consumers by having them examine carefully their own reactions to a show, news report, commentary, or political message cannot be minimized. By analyzing and evaluating their reactions, they are at the same time developing basic concepts in communication while becoming ever more aware of media as social influence. The degree of change in communication patterns and behaviors in our society also become more apparent. (The use of media in the Iranian crisis is a case in point.)

Several sources of television related study materials is appended at the end of this article for the convenience of teachers.

Journalism (4-14)

Responsible journalism is another way to develop writing ability and to enhance students' understanding of the role of mass media in contemporary society. Helping students to read newspapers to evaluate daily events in relation to their lives can lead them through a pattern of expanding consciousness in relation to changes in society.

By reading contemporary writers, news reports, and editorials,

students develop the ability of writing from perception, organization, through research to the final product. They learn about the use of words and phrases to communicate, sketch, exposit, and persuade.

Journalism also provides opportunities for exploring the interviewing process, news gathering, writing news stories, and developing news story leads. The editing process is an exciting way to motivate students to learn and practice the mechanics of writing. Critical analysis of current events are covered in the editorial, scripts can be read for broadcasting.

For example, with reference to the near disaster in Pennsylvania, an editorial might ask what the message of the incident is to the public. People on different sides of the issue may read the message differently. People in places which do not depend on nuclear power plants for energy supply may also read the message differently from those in places which do. Questions with regard to the future of the human race might also be raised. In what ways will nuclear energy (benefit) (harm) the human race? What is the potential impact on our environment? What hard evidence do we have with regard to the (advantage) (disadvantage) of alternative forms of energy such as oil, coal, wind, geothermal energy, solar energy, refuse, nuclear energy, etc.? What kind of energy legacy are we leaving to the future generations? The answers, however, can only come from careful research, objective interpretation and critical analysis of data, and values clarification -- comprehension skills which rank high in the hierarchy of cognitive abilities.

Reflections

Basic skills programs reflect the failure of large numbers of people to master language competencies essential to human communication. Such programs do lend themselves readily to learning management systems and may even turn out "good learners" according to program objectives. However, they are grossly inadequate in helping students become able readers because of the arbitrary fragmentation of the language process. Students are locked into meaningless isolated bits which become ends in themselves

rather than means to gain comprehension and knowledge. The next skill in a sequence frequently becomes the objective without provision for needed horizontal learning experiences. As a result, students have no concept of reading as an integrated process comprising LANGUAGE, THINKING and COMMUNICATION -- which enable people to function as intelligent citizens who can deal effectively with contemporary issues and problems as well as to have an understanding of the values which permeate diverse cultures. Furthermore, skills technology reduces learning to a mechanistic experience which adds to people's sense of powerlessness and alienation.

The truth is, we are all functionally illiterate at one time or another depending on the subject matter, the occasion, and the culture. In addition, what is functional for one person may not be functional for another. The best we can do is to learn to communicate by developing the ability to deal with language in all its modes, complexities and abstractness along with a growing sense of how audio-visual and printed materials are to be viewed and used in the context of specific subject and content. Such a goal can be attained when teachers attend to the identification and teaching of essential elements of language communication while helping students to build self-concept in the process of learning.

References

1. DeBakey, Lois. "Literacy: Mirror of Society," Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, 1979.
2. Ruth, Deborah Dashow. "The Next Language Art: Views of Nonprint Media," The Teaching of English, the Seventy-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Chicago, Illinois, 1977, 96-125.

Selected Sources of Television Related Study Materials

CBS Television Reading Program

Provides teachers with complete script of prime time dramatic specials designed to motivate students to read. Students are asked to read script before the program airs. Includes bibliographies, reading and writing lessons, and related creative activities. Contact local CBS television station for information.

Prime Time School Television

A national, non-profit organization devoted to the development and distribution of high quality television related study materials on a monthly basis. Membership contribution of $10 entitles a person to receive all monthly mailings of study guides of selected television presentations. Group rate of $5 per membership for ten or more people subscribing at the same time. Write PTST, 120 S. LaSalle St., Chicago, Ill. 60603.

The Six Billion $$$ Sell

Uses clips from television commercials and the young people in the film test products and talk about celebrity selling techniques, advertising promises, etc., as compared to their actual experiences with products. $240, 2-day rental $26. Write Consumer Reports Films, 256 Washington St., Mt. Vernon, N.Y. 10550.

Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center

An 8-lesson course with teacher's manual for 3rd through 5th grades. Stresses understanding television commercials and programs, separating reality from fantasy, and visual techniques used in television.